

Muḥammad, the Illiterate Prophet: An Islamic Creed in the Qur'an and Qur'anic Exegesis*

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In the Qur'an the Prophet Muḥammad is identified as *al-nabī al-ummī* (Q.7:157–8).¹ Muslim consensus has come to perceive this epithet for the Prophet of Islam as indicating conclusively that he was Muḥammad, 'the illiterate prophet.' This relates to the Islamic idea that Muḥammad is the prophet who communicated God's revelation to humankind completely and authentically. The underlying point here is the belief that, in conveying the revelation, Muḥammad was not influenced by any knowledge that he could possibly have gained through readings in previously revealed scriptures, or from anything or anyone other than God. Since the rise of Islam, Muslims have relied on this perception in particular when stressing the outstanding place Islam and its Prophet deserve within the canon of the monotheistic religions. Thus the understanding of *al-nabī al-ummī* as the Qur'anic notion of Muḥammad, 'the illiterate prophet,' has always been a major argument for Muslims in defence of Islam against those who attempted to discredit the Prophet Muḥammad and his message.

Medieval and modern scholars, however, have drawn attention to further possible meanings of the Qur'anic term *ummī* (such as 'Arabian,' 'Meccan,' 'layman' and 'heathen'). These diverse understandings are reflected in the translations of the Qur'an into Western languages. The latter fact is particularly noteworthy because, for many Muslims and most non-Muslims, the translations of the Qur'an are often the only source of first-hand information on the text and the message of the Qur'an. Yet, the (actual) meaning of the expression *al-nabī al-ummī* is of no less significance for an understanding of how the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE) saw himself.

The present article attempts to provide arguments for further discussion of the term *ummī*. It starts with an examination of particular notions on literacy and illiteracy as evident in the Qur'an and some early Arabic sources. This includes consideration of Qur'anic expressions such as *aṣṭāṭir al-awwalīn* and *tumlā 'alayhi* (parts 1–3). It deals with the philological and historical evidence of the term *ummī* as given in the Qur'an, along with the notions to be found in medieval exegetical and historical-biographical sources (*tafsīr*, *sīra* and *ḥadīth*). These data form the basis for a closer look at the interpretations offered by modern scholars. The philological and historical as well as

the theological and apologetic dimensions of the term *ummī* will also be addressed (parts 4–5). The last part of the study is dedicated to the term *umma* (part 6).

In conclusion (part 7), it is hoped that this article will provide some new insights into a complex issue that is of great significance for Muslims and for the study of Islam. These findings basically suggest that a more comprehensive appreciation of the Qur'anic term *al-nabī al-ummī* can contribute essentially to the understanding of Muḥammad's prophethood and the history of Islam.

1. The revelation and the term *qara'a*

The very first revelation to the Prophet Muḥammad (Q.96:1–5) starts with the imperative *iqra'*. This introduces God's first command to Muḥammad to *read* or *recite* verses of the revelation of the Qur'an.² These verses even seem to express the leading motif of the entire proclamation of the Qur'an and to reveal its programmatic character: Muḥammad was called by God to speak aloud a holy text and to communicate it to his people and humankind:

Read/Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot!

Read/Recite [words of the Holy Scripture]!

And your Lord, the Most Generous is the One,
who taught [the use of] the pen (*variant A*) / who taught by the pen
(*variant B*),³ taught man what he knew not [before]!

These lines also seem to indicate that Islam, from its very beginning, emphatically prioritises the gaining of (religious) knowledge, learning and education.

If *qara'a*⁴ means 'recite,' it would not necessarily imply a piece of writing, or the ability to read, as prerequisites. If it means to 'read,' one may bear in mind that Muḥammad was ordered to read from a heavenly scripture in a divine language, which would not necessarily require any knowledge in reading or writing of a human language. Nonetheless, the idea that it was a 'piece of writing' from which Muḥammad was ordered to 'read,' seems to be implied in the account of Muḥammad's first revelation as given in the earliest extant *Biography of the Prophet* by Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767), which is available in the edition of Ibn Hishām (d. ca. 218/833).⁵ This account is important because it seems to reflect to a certain degree how the very first generations of Muslims may have perceived the 'process' of the first revelation to Muḥammad. In this text, it reads:

When it was the night on which God honoured him with his mission,
... Gabriel brought him the command of God the Sublime. The
Messenger of God, God bless him and grant him salvation, said:

‘He came to me while I was asleep, with a coverlet of brocade whereon was some writing [or: in which there was a piece of writing], and said, “Read!”

I said, “What shall I read?” [or: ‘I don’t read!’ *mā aqra’u*].⁶

He pressed me with it so tightly that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said, “Read!”

I said, “What shall I read?” [or: ‘I don’t read!’ *mā aqra’u*].

He pressed me with it [again] so tightly that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said “Read!”

I said, “What shall I read?” [*mādhā aqra’u*].

He pressed me with it a third time so that I thought it was death and said “Read!”

I said, “What then shall I read?” [*mādhā aqra’u*] – and this I said only to deliver myself from him, lest he should do the same to me again. He said:

“*iqra’ bi’smi rabbika ...*” (Q.96:1–4; see above).

So I read it, and he departed from me. Then I awoke from my sleep, and it was as though these [words] were inscribed in my heart as a book (*kitāb*).⁷

Like the previous prophets, the Prophet Muḥammad was called to communicate the Word of God as contained in the heavenly archetype of the Holy ‘Book’ (*kitāb*).⁸ However, it seems that Muḥammad was also commanded to first listen to the revelation. Only then, was the Prophet (and later generations of believers as well) ordered to recite the holy text himself,⁹ to learn of its meanings by way of explanation (*bayānuhū*), and eventually convey God’s message.

... *lā tuḥarrik bihi liṣānaka li-taʿjala bihi – inna ʿalaynā jamʿahu wa-qurʾānahu – fa-idhā qaraʾnāhu fa-ʿttabiʿ qurʾānahu – thumma inna ʿalaynā bayānahu* (Q.75:15–18).

... Move not thy tongue with it to hasten it; Ours it is to gather it and to recite it. So, when we recite it, follow thou its recitation. Then Ours it is to explain it.¹⁰

One notes the emphatic way in which the Qurʾan here addresses the oral components of receiving, listening, learning and setting forth the Divine Word.¹¹

2. Reading and writing at the time of the Prophet and in the Qur'an

The information as provided in Surah 96 and Surah 75, along with the passage on the Prophet Muḥammad's first revelation as recounted in Ibn Ishāq's historical-biographical narrative, are rather ambivalent when it comes to the question as to whether Muḥammad was able to read or not. This notion, however, may be perceived differently when the general background of Arabian culture at the time of Muḥammad is taken into consideration. As known, in Arabia at the beginning of the 1st/7th century, the cultural tradition was retained almost exclusively in memory and transmitted orally. The knowledge of the Arab tribes was crystallised in poetry, genealogies, and stories of their tribal battles. The use of writing and written material – also due to the material conditions at that time – played a minor role. That is to say, it played a minor role even though the *art of writing* was already known among the Arabs and used, for example, by tradesmen and in cities.¹²

Apparently reflecting this situation, issues related to literacy in the Qur'an seem to be of subordinate importance compared with matters related to illiteracy. Nevertheless, reading and writing are implied, and gain in significance, whenever the Holy Book (*al-kitāb*, *al-Qur'ān*), reading and teachings from Holy Scriptures (*kutub*, *ṣuḥuf*), or knowledge and education in more general terms are mentioned.

2.1 The Pen

Surah 68, entitled *al-Qalam* ('The Pen'), starts with the oath:

[I swear] By the Pen, and what they inscribe (*wa'l-qalami wa mā yaṣturūna*).

According to al-Ṭabarī, these lines are presumably the second oldest of the Qur'anic revelation.¹³ They offer several meanings: they either allude to a) the 'art of writing,' b) the 'Scriptures of Revelation,' or c) 'the pen' with which all deeds of the people and their fates are recorded.¹⁴ The medieval commentators draw special attention to the latter concept, i.e. that before heaven, water and earth, God created the pen which inscribes all happenings until the Day of Resurrection (*awwalu mā khalaqa Allāhu: al-qalam*).¹⁵

As shown above, the pen is also expressly mentioned in Q.96:4–5:

alladhī 'allama bi-'l-qalami
'allama 'l-insāna mā lam ya'lam

It is possible that these lines make an allusion to the art of writing as an ability of human beings, given to them by God. The prepositional expression *bi-'l-qalami* is then not to be understood as instrumental ('with the help of the pen'), but as a kind of second object ('the pen').¹⁶ It would indicate that God is the One who taught man

the script 'and other things...' (*ma'a ashyā'a ghayri dhālika*) he did not know before¹⁷ through teaching him the use of the pen. Some Qur'an translators render accordingly:

He Who taught (the use of) the pen, (Yusuf Ali);
Who taught (to write) with the pen, (Shakir).¹⁸

Yet, it is also possible to comprehend this line as a general reference to the knowledge of the revelation, which has been handed down by God to humankind through the Holy Scriptures.¹⁹ Likewise are the following translations:

Who taught by the Pen, (Arberry);
Who teacheth by the pen, (Pickthall).

The latter understanding would make it possible to associate the contents of these, God's teachings, with the 'Guarded Tablet' (*al-lawḥa al-mahfūza*), on which the revelation is preserved in heaven in written form.²⁰ Thus it would refer to the heavenly archetype of the Qur'an, whose 'pages [are] highly-honoured, uplifted, purified – by the hands of scribes (*safara*) noble, pious.'²¹

More specifically, this passage could also refer to the holy scriptures²² which had emerged from the heavenly 'Tablet' and which were revealed to prophets before Muḥammad (such as the 'Scrolls of Abraham and Moses,' *ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm wa Mūsā*),²³ in which Jews and Christians have been reading (*yaqra'ūna 'l-kitāb*),²⁴ even though some among them had denied them when Muḥammad came to them.²⁵

2.2. The term *talā*

Another important term is *talā*. It occurs in the Qur'an sixty-three times and can mean both 'reading' and 'reciting':²⁶ the Israelites read/recite (and conclusively, study) the Scripture (*tatlūna 'l-kitāb*);²⁷ Jews read from the Torah;²⁸ Jews and Christians read/recite their Scripture (*yatlūna 'l-kitāb*),²⁹ some of them at night.³⁰ Reading the Scripture in the accurate manner means to believe in God.³¹

Biblical narratives which provide exemplary instruction for believers are reported to have been read, or they are ordered to be read and 're-'cited: the story of Cain and Abel,³² Noah,³³ Abraham,³⁴ Moses and the Pharaoh,³⁵ and, as a warning, the story of the 'one [the Biblical Balaam?] who was given God's Signs, but cast them off and went astray' (led by lust and pride).³⁶ Furthermore, Moses reads from the Scripture something about *Dhū'l-qarnayn* after he was asked to do so.³⁷ But devils also instructed ('*allama*) people and read/recited (*talā*) to them about Solomon.³⁸

Most often, however, *talā* refers in general terms to reading in the Holy Scriptures (*kitāb, ṣuḥuf*), to reciting verses of the Qur'an, or to reading the Qur'an.³⁹ *Talā 'alā* indicates more emphatically that God establishes a rule over people, which they learn

by reading/reciting the teachings of the Holy Book.⁴⁰ In Q.68:15 an unnamed unbeliever is mentioned who, 'when Our Signs are read/recited to him, will say: "[these are nothing but] *writings of the ancients*.'" ⁴¹

2.3 Writing (*kataba*) and the book (*kitāb*)

The Qur'an and Prophet Muḥammad show great respect for the previously revealed Scriptures and the written word in general. The Qur'an confirms, for example, that God had 'written' (*kataba*) for Moses 'an admonition of every kind, and a distinguishing of everything' upon 'Tablets' that He handed over to Moses on Mount Sinai so that he would command his people according to those laws,⁴² and that 'We gave to Moses the Book.'⁴³

The Qur'an states furthermore that God had taught Jesus 'the Book [*kitāb*], the Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel;' (Q.5:110).⁴⁴ Likewise, the Qur'an is taught by God.⁴⁵ And it is the duty of God's messengers to 'read' God's Signs to the people (*yatlū 'alayhim āyātihī*) and to 'teach them the Book and the wisdom ...'.⁴⁶ Also, the Qur'an calls the Jews and Christians 'The People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*),⁴⁷ an expression that seems to express great appreciation for people who had previously received a revelation in a written form.

The books in which all deeds of human beings are recorded until the Day of Judgement and the idea that God 'writes' (*kataba*) everything that people do are mentioned many times. The Qur'an admonishes, for example, that God 'write[s] down what they [the people] have forwarded and what they have left behind; [He has] taken account of everything in a clear register' (Q.36:12).⁴⁸ His 'messengers [the guardian angels] are writing down what you are devising' (Q.10:21).⁴⁹ And 'everything that they [the people] have done is in the Scrolls [of the former generations], and everything, great and small, is inscribed [*mustaṭar*]' (Q.54:53).⁵⁰ God 'writes down' (*wa Allāhu yaktubū*) everything that some people 'think up [or: plot, *bayyata*] all night other than what' was ordered.⁵¹

Writing as a way of establishing legal matters is distinctly favoured in the Qur'an. There are clear references to the need for people who are able to write, the importance of written documents, and to the practice of writing and dictating. Even detailed instructions are given how to proceed:

O believers, when you contract a debt one upon another for a stated term, then write it down! And let a writer [*kātib*] write it down between you justly. And let not any writer refuse to write it down, as God has taught him [i.e. the art of writing]. So let him write it down. And let the debtor dictate! ... And if the debtor be a fool, or weak, or unable to dictate himself, then let his guardian dictate justly..... And be not loth

to write it down, whether it [i.e. the amount] be small or great ...! That is more equitable in God's sight ... But take [at least] witnesses whenever you are trafficking one with another! And let neither a scribe nor a witness suffer harm. ... – And if you are upon a journey, and you do not find a writer, then a pledge in hand [should be required] (Q.2:282–3).⁵²

When slaves ask their masters 'for a deed in writing' [that would enable them to earn their freedom for a certain amount of money], 'then write it down for them'.⁵³

[Profane] writing material, papyrus, is mentioned twice in the Qur'an: in the singular, *qirṭās*, and in the plural, *qarāṭīs*, the latter meaning 'written' papyri.⁵⁴ The Qur'anic idea of the many pens and seas of ink (*midād*)⁵⁵ also occurs in Jewish sources.⁵⁶ A warning about certain writings is given in Q.2:78–9.

3. Qur'anic evidence on whether or not Muḥammad was able to read or write

The early Arabic sources on the history of Islam do provide evidence that the Prophet Muḥammad – especially in the second half of his career when acting as a statesman in Medina – used scribes to correspond with the tribes. Likewise, though infrequently rather than constantly, he had scribes write down (on separate pages, not yet in one single book) parts of the Divine revelation.⁵⁷

In the most widely accepted (Sunni) collections of Prophetic tradition ('The Nine Books', *al-kutub at-tisʿa*), which represent not only a historical source, but also – as one could say – the 'collective memory' of the medieval Muslim community, there are two different views evident: one tends to suggest that Muḥammad had (basic) knowledge of reading and writing,⁵⁸ the other strictly denies this.

Also the Qur'anic evidence in this respect raises more questions than it answers. On the one hand, there is God's proclamation:

We have sent down to thee the Book [*kitāb*] ... Not before this didst thou read/recite [*taṭlū*] any Book, or inscribe it with thy right hand, for then those who follow falsehood would have doubted ... (Q.29:47–8).

Generally speaking, these lines would indicate that Muḥammad did not read or write any scripture *before* he received the revelation.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Q.25:5 relates to attempts made by 'unbelievers' (here: the polytheist Meccans) to discredit Muḥammad by claiming that he was not communicating a Divine revelation but simply:

... writings of the ancients [*asāfir al-awwalīn*] which he has written down [or: which he has had written down, *iktatabahā*] and which were dictated to him [*tumlā ʿalayhi*] at dawn and in the early evening.⁶⁰

Even if this sentence refers to allegations made by the opponents of the Prophet, it is striking that the medieval Muslim scholars explain *asāṭīr al-awwālīn*⁶¹ as meaning 'writings of the ancients' or 'stories taken from writings.' Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687–8), a companion of the Prophet who 'is considered one of the greatest scholars...of the first generation of Muslims' and 'the father of Qur'anic [sic] exegesis,'⁶² is quoted with a statement according to which the singular *uṣṭūr* is an allegedly Ḥimyaritic loan-word. According to Ibn ʿAbbās, this word points to a 'piece of writing' or 'book' (*wa yusammūna 'l-kitāb uṣṭūran*).⁶³ Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī says that *asāṭīr al-awwālīn* are 'narratives that they [i.e. the ancients] used to write down in their books [*aḥādīthuhum allatī kānū yusaṭṭirūnahā fī kutubihim*].'⁶⁴

From a different angle, modern scholars support this understanding by deriving the pl. *asāṭīr* from the Arabic sing. *ṣaṭr*, 'line', and by drawing attention to the root *s-t-r* which also in other Semitic languages means 'to write.'⁶⁵

The word *iktataba* seems to have two meanings: a) 'to write down,'⁶⁶ but also, in a possibly secondary meaning, b) 'to ask somebody to write down'.⁶⁷

Yet, it is above all the expression *tumlā ʿalayhi* that reveals an important insight. On the one hand, it is stated in the medieval sources that *amlā* was unattested in Arabic in pre-Islamic times and that it may have been first used in the Qur'an (*jā'a biḥi al-Qur'ān*).⁶⁸ However, the verb *amlā ʿalā* is not granted any further explanation in these sources. Nonetheless, some commentators then choose to explain the phrase *asāṭīr...tumlā ʿalayhi* as 'writings [or tales] that were read to him [i.e. Muḥammad].' Al-Ṭabarī, for example, simply says: '*tumlā* means *tuqra'u*,' '*tumlā* means *these [tales] were read to him*.'⁶⁹ Other scholars add '... in order to memorise them.'⁷⁰ Al-Rāzī even says: 'this means that they were written down *for* him because he was *ummī* [meaning here: illiterate]'.⁷¹ In accordance with this explanation, some modern scholars translate the passage as:

they are dictated *before* him (Yusuf Ali);

(they are) *read out to* him (Shakir);

they are *recited to* him (Arberry).

The (Sunni) standard collections of *ḥadīth* with the ancient philological material preserved therein, however, provide reasons for a different understanding. There are *ḥadīth* reports clearly indicating that *amlā ʿalā*, at the time of early Islam, meant 'to dictate to a writer.' These texts say, for example, that the Prophet 'dictated to' Zayd ibn Thābit in order to let him write down (*amlā ʿalayhi fa kataba*); furthermore, that – in the middle of the 1st century (7th century CE) a transmitter wrote with his own hand a prophetic tradition that a companion of the Prophet 'dictated to him [*amlā ʿalayya fa katabtu bi yadī*]'⁷² and that in the year 146/763) – the year is given

in the *ḥadīth* – a legal decision was established in writing by *imlā'*, 'dictation'.⁷³ Though not explicitly referring to these *ḥadīth* texts, this latter meaning of *amlā'* is reflected in Pickthall's English and Paret's German Qur'an translation. Both render it as:

they [i.e. these writing/tales, *asāfīr*] were dictated to him.

4. Medieval and modern Muslim scholars on the term *ummī*

As initially mentioned, in modern times Muslims tend to perceive the Qur'anic epithet for Muḥammad, *al-nabī al-ummī*, as exclusively meaning 'the illiterate Prophet.'

Yet, the full meaning and the etymology of *ummī* is rather more complex. This has caused both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to offer a range of interpretations without, however, actually solving the problem. Especially in Western publications, the widespread understanding of *ummī* as 'illiterate' is controversial. However, there are also some attempts by contemporary Muslim scholars to shift the image of an illiterate Prophet of Islam by emphasising further possible meanings of the term *ummī*. The data as provided by the Qur'an are as follows:

The singular *ummī* occurs twice. Both times it is an attribute of the Prophet Muḥammad:

...My mercy,...I shall ordain it for...(Q.7:156) – those who follow the Messenger, the *ummī* Prophet, whom they find written down with them in the Torah and the Gospels, [who] bids them what is just and forbids them what is reprehensible, [who] makes lawful for them the good things and unlawful for them the corrupt things (Q.7:157).⁷⁴

...Believe then in God, and in His Messenger, the *ummī* Prophet (Q.7:158).⁷⁵

In several Medinan surahs, the plural of *ummī*, the term *ummiyyūn*, occurs. It signifies two different groups of people:

a) Arabs: those who have not been given (or: have not yet been given) a Scripture (Q.3:20; Q.3:75; Q.62:1–2).

b) On one occasion, certain Jews who do not 'read' (and consciously 'ignore') the Holy Scripture, and fabricate by themselves writings different from the Holy Text as revealed:

And there are some among them [i.e. the Jews] who are *ummiyyūn* not knowing the Scripture [or: who are not well-versed in the Book (because they do not read in it)], but know only fancies and mere conjectures. – But woe to those who write the Book with their hands, and

then say 'This is from God,' that they may sell it for a little price. So woe to them for what their hands have written! ... (Q.2:78–9).

Al-Ṭabarī points out that the medieval Muslim commentators (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) 'are of different opinions' regarding *ummī* and *ummiyyūn*.⁷⁶ Basically, however, the commentators present three explanations. They commonly just register these explanations in a combined form, though a somewhat complex interpretation is given priority:

4.1 *Umma* – people, nation, Arabs

Ummī is derived from *umma*, which means a 'people' or 'nation.' In pre-Islamic times, *umma* particularly signified (or was even used synonymously for) the 'people of the Arabs.'⁷⁷ On the one hand, this would imply the meaning of 'not being able to read or write' (i.e. 'unlettered,' 'illiterate,' or 'belonging to common people'). It is claimed that the Arabs prior to Islam were a people who 'did not read or write.'⁷⁸ A widespread saying of the Prophet is quoted that states:

innā umma ummiyya, lā naktubu wa lā naḥsubu

We are an *ummī* nation, we do not write and do not count.⁷⁹

It is also said that the Arabs were 'unlearned' in terms of the use of script; they were an *umma ummiyya*, i.e. 'a people [which is still] in the original state of birth [*alā aṣl wilādatihā*], who did learn neither writing nor reading.' And so the 'Prophet was *ummī*, [he did] not use to write, read and count.'⁸⁰

On the other hand, it is mentioned that, in the time of 'inexperience' or 'ignorance' (*jāhiliyya*) concerning the One God, the Arabs were 'untaught' in terms of religion. They were 'polytheists' (*mushrikūn*) or pagans, not having a 'divine scripture' (*kitāb ilāhī*),⁸¹ and therefore not reading it. Occasionally *ummī* is rendered as 'illiterate' without any explanation.

4.2 *Umm al-qurā*: Mecca

The term *ummī* is connected with a Qur'anic epithet for Mecca, *umm al-qurā* ('Mother of [all] Towns'). Thus the *nisba* '*ummī*' would express Muḥammad's 'origin from Mecca.'⁸² This understanding is rather emphatically repeated by the contemporary Muslim al-Baghdadi. He states:

It is clear, that to say that Muhammad being 'Ummi' means he was illiterate and not from Mecca 'Umm-il-Qura' is a falsity [*sic*] and clear blasphemy, and that those who repeat such an interpretation defy, without logical or divine proof, God's Divine Wisdom in choosing His best creation and most sublime invention to guide mankind: 'I have chosen you for Myself' (20:41).⁸³

Generally speaking, this explanation also focuses on the ethnic aspect of the issue, since the inhabitants of Mecca were Arabs (see 4.1).

4.3 *Umm* – mother

Ummī is also derived from *umm* ('mother'). This would indicate a person being 'in an original state, pure, natural and untouched like an infant born by the mother.'⁸⁴ Metaphorically speaking, this would incorporate the meanings of 'uneducated,' 'untaught,' and 'illiterate.' This understanding, however, seems to apply later Sufi categories, prevalent at the time of the commentators, on circumstances in early Islam.⁸⁵

At this point one can summarise that, in explaining the term *ummī* as the Qur'anic evidence of the Prophet's illiteracy, the medieval commentators maintain that the term originally included two meanings: firstly, the *inability* to read and write in general, and secondly, the *inexperience* or *ignorance* of the *kitāb* as a revealed (written) text. Nevertheless, they do focus exclusively on the inability to read – possibly since Muḥammad, after he had started to experience and receive revelations, could no longer be regarded as *ummī* in the second sense, i.e. as *inexperienced* or *ignorant* of the Holy Scripture.

Once established and accepted as a creed, Muḥammad's illiteracy has never been understood by Muslims in a derogatory sense. In fact, it has been taken as a particularly excellent sign of the genuineness of his prophethood: God sent him as His messenger at a time when he was unable to read. In this 'natural' condition, Muḥammad was chosen by God to pass the Qur'an onto the Arabs and all humankind.

It is the famous theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) who expresses this idea in an exemplary way:

If he [Muḥammad] had mastered writing and reading, he possibly would have been suspected of having studied the books of the ancestors. Hence, he would have acquired all these branches of knowledge [*ʿulūm*] through this reading [*muṭālaʿa*]. When he passed on this mighty Qur'an...without having had any learning and reading [*min ghayr taʿallum wa lā muṭālaʿa*], this was one of the miracles [*muʿjizāt*] [of his prophethood].

Muḥammad 'had not learned from a master [*ustādh*], and he had not studied any book or attended any lecture of a scholar, because Mecca was not a place of scholars. And he was not absent from Mecca for a long period of time, which would make it possible to claim that he learned [so] many sciences during that absence. God did open for him the gate of knowledge and realisation [of his prophethood], even though [he was unlettered].⁸⁶

5. Explanations offered by Islamicists

Non-Muslim specialists in the field stress the derivation of *ummī* from *umma* ('people' or 'nation'). Though their arguments differ, they agree in rejecting the meaning of 'illiterate'.⁸⁷

5.1 The ethnic aspect: Arab, Arabian

With *umma* in the sense of 'people,' 'nation [of the Arabs],' its derivatives *ummī* and *ummiyyūn* would signify someone 'belonging to the Arab *umma*,' or 'somebody of Arab origin,' or simply 'an Arab'.⁸⁸

5.2 The educational and religious aspects: 'uneducated' in general terms; 'untaught' in the Scripture

On the basis of historical and etymological arguments,⁸⁹ the plural *ummiyyūn* and the singular *ummī* respectively are understood to mean 'unlettered' or 'untaught' people.⁹⁰ They would refer to 'unlearned' people, in contrast to 'learned people' (who are knowledgeable in the Scripture).⁹¹

Furthermore, *ummī* is regarded as being comparable with the Talmudic expression *'am hā-ʿāreṣ* (the 'masses,' 'the [common] people of the world'). This expression was used by the Jews to label 'ignorant insiders' i.e. (Jewish) people who did not know the Holy Scripture or who did not know it well.⁹²

Nöldeke⁹³ has drawn attention to the fact that the terms *ummī* and *ummiyyūn* occur in the Qur'an always as counterparts of *ahl al-kitāb*, i.e. as counterparts of 'the people who possess a Holy Scripture,' who know it or are well-versed therein. Along with this observation, other scholars tend to suggest:

5.3 The question of being a believer or a 'heathen'

If the meanings of 'untaught' or 'uneducated' were strictly applied in religious terms (i.e. 'not having received a divine revelation'), *ummī* would indicate a 'heathen' (Greek: ἑθνικός").⁹⁴

6. The term *umma*

It is striking that the philological and historical significance of deriving *ummī* from *umma* is stressed by both Western and medieval Muslim scholars.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, it is in fact the meaning of *umma* as evident in the Qur'an that provides quite an astonishing insight.

6.1 In the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, the expression *umma* occurs frequently.

- a) Mainly it indicates a collective. This means an entire community; a people joined together by linguistic and/or political ties; an aggregate of tribes, or parts of a tribe.⁹⁶

- b) Furthermore, *umma* stands for an entity of people united by the same belief;⁹⁷ a religiously defined unit; or the sum of beliefs accepted by people.⁹⁸
- c) It indicates a group that breaks off from a people or from all mankind.⁹⁹
- d) It stands for an entity of species; an entire genus of animals;¹⁰⁰ and a period of time.¹⁰¹
- e) There is also one reference in which the word *umma* is applied to Abraham, demonstrating that it can also refer to an individual.¹⁰²

As shown throughout, the Qur'anic usage of *umma* never indicates a 'common folk,' nor 'unlearned people' in contrast to 'learned people' or 'scholars.' This notion is maintained by the Qur'anic ideas that each *umma* had its messenger (*rasūl*),¹⁰³ and each era its sacred book.¹⁰⁴ Only the Arabs were deprived of revelation.¹⁰⁵ Hence, God sent a messenger from among them (*wa mā arsalnā min rasūlin illā bi lisāni qawmihī li yubayyina lahum*),¹⁰⁶ who was chosen – as the Qur'an states – to be 'the one who warns in plain Arabic speech'¹⁰⁷ and to whom the 'Arabic Qur'an'¹⁰⁸ was revealed.¹⁰⁹ Thus the Arabs became a 'people' (*umma*) with a sacred text in their own language, in which they were commanded to believe.¹¹⁰

These Qur'anic notions of Muḥammad's prophethood and his message, however, contradict the suggestions repeatedly made since the last century by some Western scholars and Qur'an translators who prefer to understand *al-nabī al-ummī* as 'the prophet originating from an *unlearned* people' or the 'Prophet of the common folk,' as Arberry has it.

6.2 Further philological and historical evidence

Furthermore, this understanding is confirmed by the use of the word *umma* in other Semitic languages: Arabic *umma* (< *ummī*) relates to Proto-Semitic **umma* (Aramaic: *umm^ethā*; Hebrew: *ummā*.)¹¹¹ In Hebrew, *ummā* signified a 'nation of Gentiles,' or non-Jews, implying by this the idea of 'peoples who did not have a Scripture and did therefore not read it.'¹¹²

Also, to signify all Other Peoples, the Israelites used *ummōt hā-ʿōlām*, 'the Peoples of the World.'¹¹³ In contrast to themselves, '(the People of) Israel,' they thus labelled the 'ignorant outsiders' who did not have the Torah.¹¹⁴ Interestingly, this way of attributing the plural of *umma* to 'other people' (here: non-Jews) seems to have been extended by Medieval Muslim scholars to 'people other than Muslims'. Two authors of the 14th/15th centuries CE, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, a Ḥanbalī theologian and jurisconsult from Damascus, and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī, a Shāfiʿī legal scholar and littérateur from Egypt, designated in this way the 'opponents of Islam.' According to them, the opponents of Islam were divided into *umam* or 'nations of infidelity' (*umam al-kufr*).¹¹⁵

Similar evidence is found in *tafsīr* works: there it reads that in Ancient Arabic, *ummī* (the *nisba* of *umma*), was used – at least in its plural form – to designate ‘non-Jews.’ Several accounts of companions of the Prophet suggest that, shortly before Islam and during the lifetime of Muḥammad, (Arabic-speaking) Jews called the (other) Arabs *ummiyyūn*. The Jews did so either because ‘the Arabs did not have a religion’ (based on a revealed Scripture), or because the Arabs ‘had given up their old (polytheist) belief for another, i.e. Islam.’¹¹⁶

Other authorities quoted in the commentaries confirm that in early times the *umma* derivatives, *ummī* and *ummiyyūn*, primarily meant ‘belonging to a people that had no Scripture,’ or ‘belonging to a nation [of Gentiles],’ though implying, in a secondary sense, ‘not having’ or ‘not reading a revealed Sacred Book’. Al-Qurṭubī, for example, cites the companion of the Prophet, Ibn ‘Abbās, saying:

al-ummiyyūn al-‘Arab kulluhum, man kataba minhum wa man lam yaktub, li annahum lam yakūnū ahl al-kitāb.

The term *ummiyyūn* refers to all Arabs, i.e., those who did write and those who did not; [they were called in this way] since they were not People of the Book.¹¹⁷

Al-Qurṭubī goes on to say:

qīla: al-ummiyyūn alladhīna lā yaktubūna, wa kadhālika kānat Quraysh, ... al-ummī alladhī yaqra’u wa lā yaktubu.

It is said [also that] the *ummiyyūn* are those who do not write, as was [the case] with the Quraysh. ... [Others say that] an *ummī* is someone who reads but does not write.¹¹⁸

Al-Ṭabarī states:

‘ba‘atha fī ‘l-ummiyyūn rasūlan minhum’ *ya‘nī: min al-ummiyyūn; wa innamā qīla ‘minhum’ li anna Muḥammad kāna ummiyyan wa zahara min al-‘Arab.*

‘He [it is who] sent a prophet to the *ummiyyūn*, who was from amongst them;’ [the expression ‘from amongst them’] means ‘from amongst the *ummiyyūn*.’ Furthermore, it is said ‘from amongst them’ because [Muḥammad] was [an] *ummī*, [i.e.] arising from the Arabs.¹¹⁹

However, al-Ṭabarī says also:

innamā summiyat ummat Muḥammad al-ummiyyīna li annahū lam yunazzil ‘alayhim kitāban.

Furthermore, Muḥammad's people were named [in the Qur'an] *ummiyyūn*, since [God] had not revealed [previously any] Book to them.¹²⁰

If these and other similar explanations given in the *tafsīr* works were applied to the relevant passages of the Qur'an, the term *ummiyyūn* in the Qur'an would indicate in the first place 'Arabs,' and in the second place 'Arabs not having a Scripture.' Thus these Arabs were distinguished from peoples who had already previously received a written revelation, though implying in a secondary sense 'not reading [in it]':

And say to those who have been given the Book and to the *ummiyyūn*: 'Have you surrendered?' (Q.3:20; [early] Medinan period).

... they [some Jews] say: 'There is no way over us as to the *ummiyyūn*.' They [the Jews] speak falsehood against God and that in a written form (Q.3:75).

It is He who has raised up from amongst the *ummiyyūn* a Messenger from amongst them, to recite His signs to them and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the wisdom, even though before that they were in manifest error... (Q.62:1–2, Medinan period).¹²¹

In Q.2:78 (Medinan period), the context is different: here a group of Jews is characterised by the term *ummiyyūn*, and the secondary meaning of the term, 'not reading [in] the Holy Scripture,' is predominant:

And amongst them [i.e. the Jews], there are some that are *ummiyyūn*, not knowing the Book but knowing only fancies and mere conjectures.

Observations like these lead Wensinck to draw attention to Apostle Paul who wrote to the Romans:

I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the Apostle of the Gentiles (NT, *Romans* 11:13).

Wensinck thus suggests to characterise Muḥammad as 'the Arabian Prophet of the gentiles, speaking to the gentiles to whom no Apostle had ever been sent before.'¹²²

7. Conclusions

Based on these items of evidence on the expression *al-nabī al-ummī*, one may draw the following conclusions:

Firstly, in Qur'anic usage, both sing. *ummī* and pl. *ummiyyūn* do not represent a single meaning, but a spectrum of ideas. This spectrum covers distinct, however, intimately connected sub-meanings such as:

- anyone belonging to a people: the Arabs – i.e., a people not having a Scripture (yet);
- anyone not having a scripture – i.e., not reading it, or not reading in it;
- anyone not reading (a scripture) – i.e., not being taught or educated (by something or somebody).

Only the given Qur'anic context can finally determine which aspect of this semantic field is preferable for the understanding of the relevant passages of the Qur'an.

Secondly, the philological-historical examination of the three Qur'anic terms *ummī*, *ummiyyūn*, and *umma* does not confirm the popular interpretation of *ummī*, which focuses exclusively on illiteracy. Rather, this interpretation seems to reflect a post-Qur'anic approach that evolved in circles of Muslim learning (possibly not before the first half of the 2nd/8th century)¹²³ and that has been shaped further under the influence of Muslim theologians and apologists. These findings are based on the information given in medieval Muslim sources. However, they are also supported by some medieval Christian Arabic sources.¹²⁴

Thirdly, when understood in the way shown here, the Qur'anic expression *al-nabī al-ummī* can contribute essentially to the understanding of the history of Islam since it stresses both:

- the ethnic *origin* (Arab, Arabian), and
- the *originality* of the Prophet of Islam.¹²⁵

Somewhat similar to Christianity, where God reveals Himself through Christ ('the word made flesh'), and where the virginity of the Mother of Christ, Mary, is required to produce an immaculate vessel for the Divine Word, so in Islam, God lets people know about His existence through the Qur'an. The Prophet of Islam – communicating the Word of God – came to be seen like 'a vessel that was unpolluted by 'intellectual' knowledge of word and script, so that he could carry the trust' that God had granted him through the revelation 'in perfect purity.'¹²⁶

Thus the widespread understanding of the Prophet Muḥammad's illiteracy¹²⁷ indeed highlights a crucial feature of faith and spirituality in Islam. Today this creed has for many Muslims become a central constituent of orthodox faith and individual religious identity. Consequently it is a factor for stabilising Islamic society.

NOTES

* For certain ideas discussed in this article, see also my contributions 'illiteracy' and 'literacy' in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, forthcoming. The term 'creed' (Latin: *credo*, from *credere*, 'to believe, trust, entrust') is used here in its meaning of 'a

brief authoritative formula or religious belief.' It does not refer in the first place to its second meaning of 'a set of fundamental beliefs.'

1 Meccan surah. Nöldeke considers these two verses as possibly Medinan insertions; see Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns*, new edition by F. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl (3 vols., Leipzig: T. Weicher, 1909–38) i, pp. 158–60. 'Muḥammad in the Qur'an is called sometimes *rasūl* [messenger, Apostle], sometimes *nabī* [prophet]. It seems that the prophets are those sent by God as preachers and *nadhīr* [Warner] to their people, but are not the head of an *umma* [people, community] like the *rasūl*. One is tempted to imagine [that there is] a distinction between *rasūl* and *nabī* such as is found in Christian literature: the apostle is at the same time a prophet, but the prophet is not necessarily at the same time an apostle. But this is not absolutely certain,' because the Qur'anic statements in this regard seem to be rather ambiguous; see A.J. Wensinck, 'Rasūl,' in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1960) vol. 2, viii, p. 454b. As for the terms *nabī* and *rasūl*, see furthermore the entries 'Nabī,' (J. Horowitz), in *Enzyklopädie des Islam*, (4 vols., + supplement, Leiden: Brill, 1913–38) vol. 1, iii, p. 867, and 'Nubuwwa' (T. Fahd) in vol. 2, viii, pp. 93–7.

2 Another tradition favours Q.74:1–5 as the first revealed verses; see Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran. Geschichte und Verkündigung des arabischen Propheten* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1957) pp. 47–8.

3 For a more detailed explanation of these two translation variants, see section 2.1.

4 For the verb *qara'a* (17 times in the Qur'an) as well as the etymology and the meaning of the word *Qur'an*, see A.T. Welch, R. Paret, J.D. Pearson, 'al-Qur'ān,' in *Et*, v, 400–32. There it is maintained that *qara'a* usually means 'to recite' (i.e. [the Qur'an] from written notes?). Occasionally, it means 'to read (aloud?).' In his German translation of the Qur'an, R. Paret pays due attention to the subtle nuances of the meaning of *qara'a* when rendering it as *lesen*, *verlesen*, *rezitieren*, and *vortragen*; see Rudi Paret, *Der Koran. Übersetzung von Rudi Paret* (Stuttgart [a.o.]: Stuttgart 1985). Predominantly based on evidence provided by Aramaic (the *lingua franca* of the Near East for many centuries until it was replaced in the 7th century CE by Arabic) and Syriac, a recent publication supports the idea that Qur'anic *qara'a* (Syro-Aramaic: *qrā*) seems to basically mean 'to read.' This monograph also draws attention to further possible meanings of *qara'a* (such as 'to teach,' *allama*; see also Q.87:6). Furthermore, for Qur'anic *iqra' bi'smi rabbika*, an understanding is suggested that takes into consideration the frequent Biblical formula *qrā h-shem Yahwē*; thus, as it is said, it could mean 'proclaim the name of thy Lord.' See Christoph Luxenberg, *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000) pp. 278; 293–8, with a translation variant of Q.96:1–19. The entire issue was also discussed by Hartwig Hirschfeld, *Beiträge zur Erklärung des Qorān* (Leipzig: Otto Schulze, 1886) pp. 6–8. Emphasizing the importance of Syriac for understanding ancient Arabic, a somewhat similar approach towards the language of the Qur'an was taken already some years ago in a book by G. Lüling; for the latter see my review of *Über den Urkoran. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion der vorislamisch-christlichen Strophenlieder im Koran* (Erlangen: Verlagsbuchhandlung H. Lüling, 1993) in *Al-Qanṭara* (Madrid: 1995) 16, pp. 485–90.

5 Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767); Muḥammad ibn Hishām (d. ca. 218/833), *al-Sira al-nabawiyya li Ibn Hishām*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, 'Abd al-Hāfiẓ Shalabī (Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955) i, p. 236. Ibn Ishāq gives the following *isnād*: [Abū Nu'aym] Wahb ibn Kaysān [al-Qurashī] (d. 127/745 in Madina), a client (*mawlā*) of the Āl al-Zubayr [the 'Anti-Caliph'] 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr [al-Azdī al-Qurashī] (d. 73/692 in Marw al-Rawḍ; his mother was Asma', daughter of Abū Bakr and elder half-sister of 'Ā'isha) 'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr ibn Qatāda al-Laythī (d. 68/687–8 in Marw al-Rawḍ).

6 In al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, the account of this event is based on the authority of 'Ā'isha. There,

the text has *mā aqra'u*; the expression *mā anā bi-qārī'* is not mentioned, neither here nor elsewhere in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*. See Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī [d. 310/922], *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī al-Musammā:* [Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān (12 vols., ed. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1992) xii, pp. 644–6. In the nine canonical and semi-canonical *ḥadīth* compilations (*al-kutub al-tis'a*), the account is to be found five times. The oldest guarantors given in the *isnāds* of all five *ahādīth* are: the Medinan historian and *ḥadīth* scholar Ibn Shihāb al-Qurashī al-Zuhri (d. 124/742) – the Medinan author of legal and historical books, 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr al-Azdī (d. 93/713; whose written collections on *sīra* were also used by Ibn Ishāq); 'Urwa transmits on the authority of Muḥammad's wife, 'Ā'isha (d. 58/678 in Medina). All five *ahādīth* have *mā anā bi-qārī'*. It seems that the widespread understanding of *mā aqra'u* as 'I cannot read' (and as found in many commentaries of later time) is based on these canonical traditions. For the *ahādīth*, see Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, nos. 4, 4954, 6982; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 160; and *Musnad* Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, no. 25428. Furthermore see Nöldeke (fn. 1) i, p. 15.

7 This translation is my own. However, I have largely consulted Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishāq's Sīra Rasūl Allāh. With Introduction and Notes by A. Guillaume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Repr. 1967) p. 106.

8 Q.62:2. See also A.J. Wensinck, 'Muhammed und die Propheten' in *Acta Orientalia*, Leiden: 2 (1924) pp. 169–98; esp. pp. 191–2.

9 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 6, xii, pp. 338–42, states that the commentators offer different understandings of these verses. One of them is that Muḥammad used to memorise the verses while he was receiving the revelation. Other commentators say that the Prophet moved his lips all the time whenever he was memorising the Qur'an; it is said that he did so until he received this revelation, commanding him not to do so.

10 A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) p. 313.

11 For a fascinating description of how Muslims appreciate aesthetically the *text* and *sound* of the Qur'an, and how Muslims of later generations recall the powerful effect that listening to the Qur'an had on its 'first hearers,' see Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran* (München: Beck, Sonderausgabe, 2000) and my review of this book in *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 6.1 (Abingdon: Carfax, 2003).

12 The invention of the Arabic script is, according to ancient Arabic sources, attributed 'to persons of legendary nature, [...these sources, however,] content themselves with affirming that the script was in use in the Arab kingdom of the Syria-Mesopotamia region as well as in Mecca in the 6th century A.D.:' see J. Sourdel-Thomine, 'Kharr', in *EP* iv, pp. 1113–28, esp. p. 1113. Furthermore N. Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Kur'anic Development; with a full description of the Kur'ān manuscripts in the Oriental Institute* (Chicago: University Press, 1939). J. Sourdel-Thomine, 'The Development of Arabic Script,' in A.F.L. Beeston (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) ch. 1. Franz Rosenthal, 'Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī on Penmanship,' in *Ars Islamica*, 13–14 (1948) pp. 1–30. Id. 'Significant Uses of Arabic Writing,' in *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961), pp. 15–23. S. al-Munajjid, *Dirāsāt fī Ta'rīkh al-Kharr al-'Arabī mundhu Bidāyatihī ilā Nihāyat al-'Aṣr al-Umawī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1972). See also the following articles: Dmitri V. Frolov, 'The Spread of Literacy in Mecca and Medina at the Time of Muḥammad,' in *The Humanities in Russia: Soros Laureates. The 1994 All-Russia Competition of Research Projects in Humanities* (Moscow: [International Science Foundation], 1997) pp. 133–7. Michael Lecker, 'Zayd ibn Thābit, 'A Jew with Two Sidelocks': Judaism and Literacy in Pre-Islamic Madina (Yathrib),' in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 56 (1997) pp. 259–73. Gregor Schoeler, 'Writing and Publishing: On the Use and Function of Writing in the First Centuries of Islam,' in *Arabica*, 44/3 (1997) pp. 423–35.

13 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xii, p. 645.

14 For a more detailed discussion, see Rudi Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz von Rudi Paret* (Stuttgart [a.o.]: W. Kohlhammer, 1985), p. 516 (on Q.96:3–5) with Qur'anic cross-references of the different meanings.

15 This understanding is based on a saying of the Prophet, see e.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xii, pp. 177–8.

16 Like in Q.2:282. This understanding, *‘allama al-khaṭṭa bi'l-qalami*, is reported to have been found in the old Qur'an codex of ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, a member of the commission that was appointed by the 3rd Caliph ʿUthmān (r. 644–56 CE) to officially collect and publish the text of the Qur'an; see Arthur Jeffery, ed. *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an; the old codices, the Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif of Ibn Abī Dāwūd, together with a collection of the variant readings from the codices of Ibn Masʿūd, Ubayy, ʿAlī, Ibn ʿAbbās, Anas, Abū Mūsā and other early Qur'anic authorities which present a type of text anterior to that of the canonical text of ʿUthmān* (Leiden: Brill, 1937) p. 229.

17 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 6, xii, p. 646.

18 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: text, translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali* (Washington, D.C.: American International Print. Co., 1946). M.H. Shakir, *The Qur'an [al-Qur'an al-hakim], translated by M.H. Shakir. English & Arabic* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1993) Paret in his translation gives both variants: '(4) *der den Gebrauch des Schreibrohrs gelehrt hat (oder: der durch das Schreibrohr gelehrt hat)*.' See also Nöldeke in ZDMG 41 (1887) p. 723; and Paret, *Kommentar* (fn. 14) p. 515. Using this line of the Qur'an as a reference, the supremacy of the pen is stressed in works of later medieval Arabic authors such as those by the philologist and literary critic al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) and Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349); see Adrian Gully, 'The Sword and the Pen in the Pre-Modern Arabic Heritage: A literary representation of an important historical relationship,' in *Insights into Arabic Literature and Islam: Ideas, Concepts and Methods of Portrayal*, ed. by S. Günther (forthcoming, 2003).

19 Frants Buhl and Hans Heinrich Schaefer, *Das Leben Muhammads* (Leipzig: Quelle, 1930) pp. 137–8. Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment: The Gunning lectures*, Edinburgh University, 1925 (London: Macmillan, 1926), pp. 93–4. Id. *The Qur'ān Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the surahs* (vols. i–ii, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937–9) vol. ii, p. 635. Paret, *Kommentar* (fn. 14), p. 515. Marmaduke William Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: an explanatory translation* (London: Knopf, 1930).

20 Q.85:22. See also Johann Fück, 'Das Problem des Wissens im Qur'ān,' in *Vorträge über den Islam. Aus dem Nachlaß hrsg. und um einen Anmerkungsteil ergänzt von Sebastian Günther* (Halle (Saale): Universitätsdruckerei, 1999) pp. 1–31 [= *Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft* 27] p. 1.

21 Q.80:13–15. See also Q.85:21–2; Q.56:77–80; Q.98:2–3; Q.74:52. For the noun *safara* (scribes, or reciters, or angels), see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 6, xii, pp. 445–6. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿUmar al-Qurṭubī al-Anṣārī [d. 671/1223], *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī li'l-Ṭibāʿa wa'l-Nashr, 1967) vol. ix, p. 216. As for *safara* in other Semitic languages, which clearly indicates the meaning of 'scribes,' see Josef Horowitz, *Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964) p. 229. Arthur Jeffery, *The Qur'an as Scripture* (New York: Moore, 1952) pp. 13 and 15. Paret, *Kommentar* (fn. 14), p. 502.

22 See also Q.2:151; Q.4:113; Q.6:91; Q.55:1–4; Q.2:229.

23 Q.87:18–19; Q.2:53; Q.46:11

24 Q.10:94.

25 Q.2:101–2. For more specific information on the meaning of *kitāb* and *ahl al-kitāb* in the

Qur'an, see the following studies: Julius Augapfel, 'Das *kitāb* im Qurān,' in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 29 (1915), pp. 384–92. Frants Buhl, 'Die Schrift und was damit zusammenhängt im Qur'an,' in *Oriental studies published in commemoration of the fortieth anniversary (1883–1923) of Paul Haupt... under the editorial direction of Cyrus Adler and Aaron Ember* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1926) pp. 364–73. Dawid Künstlinger, 'Kitab und *ahlu l-kitabi* im Kuran,' in *Rocznik orientalistyczny* (= *Polish archives of oriental research*), Polska Akademia Nauk, Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych (Warszawa), 4 (1926), pp. 238–47. Id. 'Die Namen der Gottes-Schriften im Qurān,' in *Rocznik orientalistyczny* (= *Polish archives of oriental research*), Polska Akademia Nauk, Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych (Warszawa), 13 (1937), pp. 72–84. W. St. C. Tisdall, 'The Book of the People of the Book,' in *Moslem World* 2 (1916), pp. 164–170; and Herbert Berg, 'Tabari's exegesis of the Qur'anic term al-Kitab,' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995), pp. 761–74. See now also Daniel A. Madigan, art. 'Book,' in *EQ* i, pp. 242–51; and id. *The Qur'ân's Self Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and my review of this book forthcoming in *Al-Masaq. Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* (2002).

26 For the semantic field of *talā* in the Qur'an, see Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1961) pp. 159–61.

27 Q.2:44.

28 Q.3:93.

29 Q.2:113.

30 Q.3:113.

31 Q.2:121.

32 Q.5:27.

33 Q.10:71.

34 Q.26:69.

35 Q.28:3.

36 Q.7:175–6. See G. Vajda, 'Bal'am' in *EF*², i, p. 984, and Paret, *Kommentar* (fn. 13), p. 179.

37 Q.18:83(–98). 'It is generally agreed both by Muslim commentators and modern occidental scholars that *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* ('the two-horned') is to be identified with Alexander the Great. The story is told in reply to questioners, often said to be Jews.' See W. Montgomery Watt, 'al-Iskandar,' in *EF*² iv, p. 127.

38 Q.2:102.

39 Q.2:44, 113, 129, 151, 252; Q.3:58, 101, 108, 164; Q.6:151; Q.8:2, 31; Q.10:15, 16, 61; Q.13:10; Q.17:107; Q.18:27; Q.19:58; Q.19:73; Q.22:72; Q.23:66, 105; Q.27:92; Q.28:45, 53; Q.28:59; Q.29:45, 51; Q.31:7; Q.33:34; Q.34:43; Q.37:3; Q.39:71; Q.45:6, 8, 25, 31; Q.46:7; Q.62:2; Q.65:11; Q.68:15 like Q.86:13; Q.98:2.

40 Q.4:127; Q.5:1; Q.22:30; Q.23:72.

41 That the expression *asāṭir al-awwālīn*, which is relevant here again, indeed refers to 'writings' (the previously revealed scriptures ?) can be seen, for example, from Q.68:37: 'Or do you have a Book in which you study!' For *yaṣfurūna* meaning *yakhuṭṭūna*, *yaktubūna*, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (fn. 6) xii, pp. 177–8. See also fn. 61.

42 Q.7:145.

43 Q.2:87.

44 Q.3:48–9.

45 Q.53:5; Q.55:2.

46 Q.3:164; see also Q.2:129; Q.2:151; Q.62:2; (Q.65:4;) Q.4:113.

47 See the publications (fn. 25) by Augapfel, Tisdall and Künstlinger.

48 Q.36:12.

49 Q.10:21; also Q.43:80.

50 Q.54:53.

51 Q.4:81; cf. also Paret, *Der Koran* (fn. 4), p. 68.

52 See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (fn. 6) iii, p. 117. For the translation, see Arberry (fn. 10), pp. 70–1. See, furthermore, Émile Tyan, *Histoire de l'Organisation Judiciaire en Pays d'Islam*, vol. i, (rev. and corr. ed.), Leiden: Brill, ²1960), i, p. 73. Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950) p. 186. Nöldeke (fn. 1) i, pp. 78–84; Buhl-Schaeder (fn. 19) pp. 136–8; and Adel Theodor Khoury, *Der Koran. Arabisch-Deutsch. Übersetzung und wissenschaftlicher Kommentar* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verl.-Haus Mohn, ²1992) iii, pp. 249–54 (with detailed explanations and references).

53 *Wa'lladhīna yabtaghūna 'l-kitāb ... fa-kātibūhum*, Q.24:33.

54 Q.6:7 and Q.6:91.

55 Q.31:27; Q.18:109.

56 See Hermann Leberecht Strack, Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. in vii (München: C.H. Beck, 1922–61) ii (1956) pp. 587. Eleonore Haeuptner, *Koranische Hinweise auf die materielle Kultur der alten Araber* (Tübingen: (Diss.) Universität zu Tübingen, 1966) pp. 99–100.

57 In favour of this speaks a widespread *ḥadīth* according to which the Prophet dictated (*amlā* 'alayhi) verses of the Qur'an to Zayd ibn Thābit. The latter is well known in the Islamic tradition for the significant role he played in the collection of the various parts of the Qur'anic revelation, their arrangement and codification in one piece of writing (*muṣḥaf*). See, for example, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 2832, 4592; also Muhammad Hamidullah, *Sahifah Hammam ibn Munabbih, The earliest extant work on the Hadith* (English trans. and edn, Hyderabad: Habib, ⁵1961; first Arabic edn, Damascus, 1953) pp. 2–13 [= *Publications of Centre Culturel Islamique* (Paris) 2].

58 See the prophetic traditions given in fn. 127. For a more detailed discussion of this type of *ḥadīth*, along with the tendencies it may display for or against certain political-religious groups of early Islam, see Nöldeke (fn. 1) i, pp. 12–17. Interestingly, Nöldeke states furthermore that *kataba* can also mean 'to dictate' to a writer; see *ibid.* 13. He relies on this in a number of reports (preserved especially in Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt*) which tell how Muḥammad had scribes write down (*kataba*) his letters for him.

59 For a discussion of these and other reports, see Aloys Sprenger, 'Konnte Muḥammad lesen?' in id. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad*, 3 vols., Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, ²1869, pp. 398–402.

60 Especially in Mesopotamia and Iraq during the century of the 'Abbāsids (8th/9th century CE), the first Christian apologies in Syriac and Arabic appeared, in response to the religious claims of Islam. From that time dates one of the longest Christian descriptions of Islam in Arabic: the (fictitious) correspondence between the Muslim 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥashimī and the Christian 'Abd al-Masiḥ al-Kindī, written by a (most probably Nestorian) Christian (see fn. 124). As for the portrait of Muḥammad, there it reads: '...when...he claimed prophethood, and that he was a messenger, sent from the Lord to the worlds,...[t]his was due to the instruction of the man *who dictated to him*, whose name and history we shall mention in another place in our

book' (my emphasis). See Sidney H. Griffith, 'The Prophet Muḥammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the first Abbasid century,' in *La Vie du Prophète Mahomet. Colloque de Strasbourg (octobre 1980)*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983 [= *Bibliothèque des Centres D'Etudes Supérieures spécialisés. Travaux du Centre d'Etudes Supérieures spécialisé d'Histoires des Religions de Strasbourg*] pp. 133, 137–8.

61 The expression *asāfir al-awwalīn* occurs nine times in the Qur'an: Q.6:25, Q.8:31, Q.16:26, Q.23:83, Q.25:5, Q.27:68, Q.46:17, Q.68:15 and Q.83:13. In the Qur'an, the expression 'has a distinctly pejorative connotation when used by unbelievers inclined to compare the revelation with fables and old wives' tales to which no credence should be given. The difficulty which lexicographers have in finding the singular of *asāfir* proves that this term, probably deriving from the Greek ἱστορία (Latin: *historia*), had served to form a pejorative plural [accord. to the pattern *afā'il*] and that the corresponding singular had been forgotten or had never existed. Nowadays the term has been reinstated in the singular form *uṣṭūra* with the particular meaning of legend or myth.' See Ch. Pellat, 'Ḥikāya,' in *EF²* iii, pp. 367–7, esp. p. 367.

62 L. Veccia Vaglieri, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-ʿAbbās' in *EF²* i, p. 40a.

63 Quoted by Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 911/1505), *al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Saʿd al-Mandūh, parts i–iv (2 vols., Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1996) part ii, p. 380, no. 2466.

64 See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* ix, p. 366. In explicit reference to the Qur'an verse discussed here, the 13th century philologist Ibn Manẓūr mentions this word along with the pl. *aṣṭur*, *aṣṭār* and *suṭūr*; see Muḥammad ibn [al-] Mukarram ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311–12), *Lisān al-ʿArab* (15 vols., Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1992, 1955) iv, p. 363. Other medieval scholars explain *asāfir* instead as a plural of sing. *uṣṭūra*, 'tale,' or 'story;' see *Jalālayn* on Q.25:5.

65 Sprenger (fn. 59) i, p. 16. Fück 6.

66 Synonymous with *istansakha* (see Ibn Kathīr vi, p. 157), *intansakha* (see *Jalālayn* on Q.25:5); or *kataba* (see *Lisān al-ʿArab*) fn. 64, i, p. 698. Likewise is Paret's translation, 'die er sich aufgeschrieben hat.'

67 *Saʿalahā an yaktuba lahū kitāban fī ḥājatin*, see *Lisān*, fn. 64, i, p. 698. To the latter meaning refer translations such as: '[which] he has caused to be written' (Yusuf Ali, fn. 18); 'he has got [these tales] written' (Shakir, fn. 18); or 'he has had written down' (Arberry, fn. 10).

68 See *Lisān al-ʿArab*, fn. 64, xv, p. 291.

69 See al-Ṭabarī, ix, p. 366; Ibn Kathīr, vi, p. 158.

70 *Li-yahfaẓahā*, see *Jalālayn* on Q.25:5; and *hattā tuḥfaẓa*, see Qurṭubī, xiii, p. 4.

71 *Al-maʿnā: annahā kutibat lahū wa huwa ummī*, see Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr (Mafātīḥ al-ghayb)*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad (32 vols. Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Bahīyya al-Miṣriyya, 1938), xxiii, p. 51.

72 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no. 6478.

73 See Dārimī, *Sunan*, ii, p. 62, no. 2190; furthermore: '[the terms] *imlāʾ*' and *dictating to a scribe* mean one and the same' (*al-imlāʾu wa'l-imlālu ʿalā 'l-kātibi wāḥidun*), see *Lisān al-ʿArab*, fn. 64, xv, p. 291.

74 The Old Testament, Isaiah 29:11, reads as follows: 'And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: (12) And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.' (Italics as given in *The Bible: Authorised King James Version*, edited with an introduction and notes by

Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 790. See also Jeremiah 1:6–9.

75 Nöldeke, fn. 1, i, pp. 158–60. For the Arabic text, see the appendix, no. 6.

76 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 6, iii, p. 316.

77 E.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xxii, p. 88 (on Q.62:2).

78 Al-Qurṭubī, fn. 21, vii, p. 299 (on Q.7:157).

79 Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1839), *Faṭḥ al-Qadīr al-Jāmiʿ bayna Fannay al-Riwāya wa 'l-Dirāya fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* (4 vols., Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964, ii, p. 252 (Q.7:157).

80 E.g. Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ʿUzayr as-Sijistānī (d. 386/996), *Nuḥḥat al-Qulāb fī Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qurʾān al-ʿāzīz*, ed. Yūsuf ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Marʿashlī (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1990, p. 112). Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ*, fn. 21, vii, p. 298 (on Q.7:157).

81 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 6, iii, p. 214 (on Q.3:20). Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459); Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *Tafsīr Jalālayn*, written in 870/1465, (Cairo: Maṭbūʿāt Maktabat M. Nihād Hāshim al-Kutubī, 1967) (on Q.3:20). Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 70, vii, pp. 227–8, (on Q.3:20). Al-Shawkānī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 79, i, p. 354 (on Q.3:75); likewise al-Shahid Zayd ibn ʿAlī [ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib] (d. 120/738), *Tafsīr Gharīb al-Qurʾān*, ed. Ḥasan Muḥammad Taqī al-Ḥakīm (Beirut: al-Dār al-ʿĀlamiyya, 1992) p. 106 (on Q.3:20).

82 E.g. al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ*, fn. 21, vii, p. 299 (on Q.7:157).

83 Abualī Al-Baghdādī, 'Muhammad, the Umni Prophet,' in *Arab Review*, London: 1/4 (1993) pp. 38–40, esp. p. 40.

84 E.g. al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 70, viii, p. 109 (on Q.3:75). Al-Shawkānī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 79, ii, p. 252 (Q.7:157).

85 See Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimension of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) pp. 26 and 218. See also fn. 126.

86 Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, fn. 70, xv, pp. 23 and 29 (on Q.7:157 and 158). See also ʿAlī ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 251/865), *K. al-Dīn wa 'l-Dawla* (Beirut: 1979). See the chapter 'Fī ummiyyat al-naḥī wa anna al-kitāb alladhī anzalahū Allāhu ʿalayhi āyatun li'l-nubuwwa' ('On the Prophet's illiteracy and the fact that the Book which God revealed to him [and caused to utter] is a sign of prophecy'), esp. pp. 98–9. Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible, From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden, 1996) esp. pp. 27–30, pp. 144–8.

87 For renderings of *ummī* in Western translations of the Qurʾān, see Khoury, fn. 52, ii, pp. 30–1. Furthermore, see R. Paret, 'Umma,' in *EI*¹, iv, (1934) pp. 1015–16; and id. 'Ummī,' in *EI*¹, iv, p. 1016.

88 A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: its genesis and historical development* (Cambridge, 1932) esp. p. 6; and Carlo Alfonso Nallino, 'Il significato del vocabolo coranico *Ummī* applicato a Maometto e quello dei *al-Ummiyyūn*,' in *Raccolta di scritti editi e inediti ... a cura di Maria Nallino*. Roma [= Pubblicazioni dell'istituto per l'Oriente II] (1940) pp. 60–5.

89 See also 4.1 and 5.1.

90 'Untaught' person, layman: Greek: sing. λαϊκός; Latin: *laicus*; Aramaic/Syriac pl. ʿālmāyā; Hebrew pl. *gōyīm*. For the double meaning of *gōyīm*, see Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The life of Muhammad as viewed by the early Muslims* [= *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 5] (Princeton/New Jersey: Darwin Press, 1995) pp. 24–5: a) 'Gentiles,' or 'people not belonging to the Jews,' 'a non-Jewish *umma*,' and b) in a metaphorical sense, Jews who are ignorant concerning the Torah and the religious duties.

91 For example, Rückert, Amari, Kasimirski, Montet; see Khoury, fn. 52, ii, p. 30. See also Buhl, fn. 25, p. 56; and Rubin, fn. 90, p. 24. Arberry, fn. 10, translates *al-nabī al-ummī* as the Prophet 'of the common folk,' which seems to reflect both meanings (5.1 and 5.2); this would also express the origin from an underprivileged social class.

92 A. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?* (Bonn, 1833) pp. 27–8. English trans. *Judaism and Islam. Prolegomenon* by M. Pearlman (New York: Ktav, 1970). H. Fleischer, *Kleinere Schriften* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1885–8) vol. ii, pp. 114–17. K. Ahrens, 'Christliches im Quran. Eine Nachlese,' in *ZDMG* 9, Neue Folge (1930), pp. 15–68, esp. p. 37. More recently and with different nuances, Norman Calder, 'The *Ummī* in early Islamic juristic literature,' in *Der Islam* 67 (1990), pp. 111–23. In the New Testament, the apostles are called 'unlearned and ignorant men' (ἀγράμματοι, see *The Acts of the Apostles* 4:13), i.e. those who are not versed in reading and explaining the Scripture. They are called in this way in contrast to the Bible scholars, i.e. the 'scribes' (γραμματεῖς, see *The Acts of the Apostles* 4:5).

93 Nöldeke, fn. 1, i, p. 14.

94 E.g. Sprenger, fn. 59. Joseph Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, Leipzig [u.a.] 1926) [= *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients* 4], esp. pp. 51–3. Buhl (fn. 25), Paret, Blachère, and recently Isaiah Goldfeld, 'The illiterate prophet (*Nabī Ummī*): an inquiry into the development of a dogma in Islamic tradition,' in *Der Islam* 57 (1980), pp. 58–67.

95 See also E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, i, p. 92. According to this approach, both *ummī* and *ummiyyūn* are *nisba*-forms of the noun *umma*. *Umma*, in its turn, stands for any group, which is united by a common belief, common era or common place; every individual identified by this *nisba* as part of this entity, is expected to share its general features; see *al-Qurṭayn*, li-[Muhammad ibn Ahmad] Ibn Muṭarrif al-Kinānī (d. 454/1062) aw: *Kitabay Mushkil al-Qur'ān wa Gharibihī*, [ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muslim] Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889?), (2 vols. in 1, Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1979?), pp. 74–5. Interestingly, Ibn Qutayba refers in this context to the Qur'anic expression *umma yadʿūna ilā 'l-khayr* (Q.3:104), which he explains as a 'group of scholars ...i.e., teachers (*jamāʿat al-ʿulamāʾ*) ... ay muʿallimūna'!

96 This is shown by the fact that prophets were sent to different *ummas* (see Q.16:36, Q.16:84, Q.16:89, Q.10:47, Q.10:49, Q.7:34, Q.6:108; all third Meccan period); some of them believed, others did not (Q.16:36).

97 This means the original *umma wāḥida* of humankind (Q.10:19, third Meccan period); God could have made humankind an *umma wāḥida*, if He had wanted to do so (Q.43:33, second Meccan period; Q.42:8, third Meccan period; and Q.5:48, Medinan period).

98 See Q.43:22–3 (second Meccan period), referring to the paganism of pre-Islamic Mecca. This meaning can be viewed in connection to Q.23:52, Q.21:92 (second Meccan period) where the identity of the Islamic *umma* – in contrast to the *ummas* of earlier prophets – seems to be established.

99 Q.3:104, Q.3:110 (Medinan period).

100 *Ummam*, see Q.6:38 (third Meccan period).

101 This meaning is probably connected to the duration of a *umma* generation of people (Q.11:8, Q.12:45, third Meccan period).

102 Q.16:121 (third Meccan period).

103 Q.10:48, Q.16:38, also Q.13:8, Q.16:65, Q.35:22 (all third Meccan period).

104 Q.13:18 (end of the third Meccan period).

105 Q.36:5, Q.43:20 (second Meccan period).

106 Q.14:4 (third Meccan period).

107 Q.26:194–5 (second Meccan period).

108 Q.20:112, Q.43:2 (second Meccan period); Q.12:2, Q.39:29, Q.41:2, Q.42:5 (third Meccan period).

109 These ideas are further confirmed by expressions such as *Qur'ān Mubīn* (Q.15:1, Q.26:69, second Meccan period), *Kitāb Mubīn* (Q.44:1, Q.26:1, Q.43:1, Q.27:1, second Meccan period; Q.12:1, Q.28:1, third Meccan period; Q.5:18, Medinan period), as well as *Āyāt Bayyināt* (e.g., Q.22:16, Q.29:49, Q.57:9, Meccan period), along with the derivatives of *fuṣṣila* ('to be divided into particular sections', a term that points to the process of the revelation of the Qur'an).

110 Q.26:198–9 (second Meccan period); Q.42:44 (third Meccan period).

111 See also *ET*¹, IV, p. 1015; Horovitz, *Proper Names*, fn. 21, pp. 46–7.

112 It seems that the (loan) word *umma* was also used in Ancient Arabic from a very early time on. This at least has been concluded by Horovitz based on the Ṣafā inscription; see *ET*¹, IV, p. 1015a; and id. *Proper Names*, fn. 21, pp. 46–7. Presumably, therefore, the ideas implied in the word *umma* in other Semitic languages were also introduced to Ancient Arabic.

113 This expression is not found in the Torah, but occurs often in the Midrashim. The latter increasingly circulated during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE.

114 See Horovitz, Rubin (fn. 90), and Wansbrough.

115 Observed and commented on by Ulrich Haarmann, 'Glaubensvolk und Nation im islamischen und lateinischen Mittelalter,' in *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berichte und Abhandlungen* (Berlin: Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996) vol. 2, pp. 161–99, esp. p. 178.

116 For example, Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, viii, pp. 108–9 (on Q.3:75).

117 Al-Qurṭubī, fn. 21, xviii, p. 91 (on Q.62:2).

118 Ibid. pp. 91–2.

119 Al-Ṭabarī, fn. 6, xii, p. 89 (on Q.62:2, on the authority of Ibn Zayd).

120 Ibid.

121 The Old Testament, Deuteronomy 18:18, reads as follows: 'I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.' See *The Bible*, fn. 74, p. 240.

122 Wensinck, *Creed*, fn. 88, p. 6; and Wensinck, *Muhammed*, fn. 8, p. 192.

123 Goldfeld, fn. 94, p. 58. McAuliffe notes that, taken collectively, the commentators were 'an 'interpretive community', one both defined by a textual tradition and constrained by its communal assumptions and methodologies. Yet, even within the confines of these assimilated assumptions, the individual *mufasssīr* meets the text anew and creatively shapes the continuing permutation of the critical community.' See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Text and Textuality: Q.3:7 as a Point of Intersection,' in (ed.) Issa J. Boullata, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000) pp. 56–76, esp. pp. 68–9.

124 By comparison with the earlier messengers of God, the Christian author of the al-Hāshimī/ al-Kindī correspondence (see fn. 60) lets the Christian discussant of this debate, al-Kindī, say to his Muslim counterpart: 'Your master was an *ummi* man, who had no learning, and no knowledge of these reports. And had it not been communicated to him by inspiration, and prophesied to him, from where would he have learned it, to the point of setting it down and bringing it forth?' Al-Kindī answers his own question by claiming that it was the Christian monk Sergius (Sargis Baḥīrā) who taught Muḥammad the Qur'an, which was – according to al-Kindī – subsequently distorted by the two Jews ʿAbd Allāh ibn Salām and Kaʿb al-Aḥbār.

See ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (?) (3rd/9th century), *Risālāt ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī ilā ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī yadʿūhu bihā ilā ʿl-Islām wa Risālat ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ilā ʿl-Hāshimī yaruddu bihā ʿalayhi wa yadʿūhu ilā ʿl-Naṣrāniyya*, ed. by Anton Tien (London, 1880) p. 126. For the translation given here, see Griffiths, fn. 60, pp. 142–3. I thank U. Pietruschka (Halle) for drawing my attention to this passage.

125 The dimensions implied in the two terms 'origin' and 'originality' seem to well represent the so-called 'world behind the text.' However, the notion of the 'originality' of the Prophet of Islam – and thus the message he conveyed – has dynamically gained in significance *in* and especially *for* 'the world in front of the text.' This makes it clear again that there are limits in viewing language 'as referential and informative and [...] meaning as stable and determinate, passively awaiting discovery and disclosure, uncovering and conveyance,' as McAuliffe, fn. 123, p. 67, states.

126 Schimmel, fn. 85, pp. 26–7.

127 For the question as to the Prophet Muḥammad's (il-)literacy, see furthermore the interesting traditions in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Imām ... al-Bukhārī)* nos. 2700, 3814 and 4251; *Musnad Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, no. 18161; and *Sunan al-Dārimī*, no. 2507.

